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WORLD EXCLUSIVE

# World exclusive: Max Martin, #1 hitmaker

FEBRUARY 11, 2016



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**Los Angeles.** Some of the most beloved hit-songs the world has listened to for the past 20 years were written by a Swede – **Martin Sandberg**. He is better known as Max Martin, but few out of the music-business knows who he is. Until now. For the first time Max Martin tells his story in a world exclusive interview.

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**Photo:** Axel Öberg

**606**  
DELNINGAR



**E**ach era can be defined by its songs. The greatest hits create collective memories. Melodies encapsulate time, and have done so for a thousand years, from arias to pop songs.

If you'd like to experience how it felt to live in, say, 1972 or 1983, you'd do well to listen to the most typical tunes from that one year. This becomes strikingly clear when you put together soundtracks for film and TV-series. Songs can tell a lot more than pictures.

For the past 20 years, the most widely spread and hummed tunes in the world have been written by a Swede, Max Martin, the recipient of the 2016 Polar Music Prize. It's his melodies that bottle up our times and preserve it for the future.

A busy restaurant in West Hollywood. It's Saturday, around lunchtime. The noise is building up, as it tends to do in crowded restaurants when many of the guests have decided to treat themselves to a glass of wine. As so often happens in Los Angeles, the majority of the people in the room, from patrons to waiters, look like they're somehow involved in the entertainment industry. J. Alexander, one of the judges from "America's Next Top Model", draws stares as he sits down.

We wait by the bar. When we're finally ushered to our table, Max Martin is hungry and begins studying the menu. After just a minute, a waitress appears and points out a better table that's suddenly become available. Would we like to switch? Immediately, the speculations begin. Why would she offer us a new table? Is it because someone has recognized Martin?

Max Martin, who hasn't so far participated in the conversation, looks up from his menu and says: "I sure hope not".

It turns out to be a false alarm. Max Martin can relax. Nobody recognizes him this lunch either.



## CHAPTER 1

## Revealing the secret behind the hits

**A**fter lunch, Max Martin drives me around in the streets close to Sunset Boulevard. Waiting by a red light, we can catch the sounds of Top 40-hits playing in nearby cars. *Hands to myself* LYSSNA with **Selena Gomez**, a song heard everywhere this week. *Wildest Dreams* with **Taylor Swift**. *In The Night* LYSSNA with **The Weeknd**.

Three examples of current Top 40-tracks – all three with Max Martin as co-composer. The only driver who doesn't seem to be listening to Top 40-radio is Max Martin himself.

"No, I rarely listen to the radio", says Martin while driving. "Most of the time, I tend to listen to my own stuff, whatever I happen to be working on at the moment." What he listens for is details that could be improved. Is the bass too loud? Is the intro too long?

On his phone, Martin plays a demo that world-leading artist X just may record. It's followed by a song that might be recorded by world leading-artist Y. When Martin asks me what I think, it seems like he's more interested in what my body language is telling him than in what I actually say. Later on, I'll find out why.

As Max Martin drops me off at my hotel in West Hollywood, a group of teenage girls are sitting on a wall right across from us, waiting. They've been sitting there since yesterday. They're hoping to catch a glimpse of a teenage pop star apparently staying at the hotel.

They don't seem to have a clue that the longhaired Swede, who's right now stepping out of his car, probably knows their idol and have, perhaps, written the very songs they all know by heart.

Most music listeners likely have the same perception of Max Martin as **Adele** used to have.

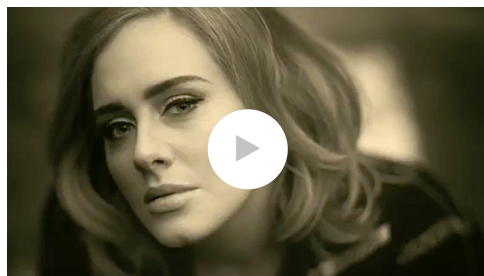
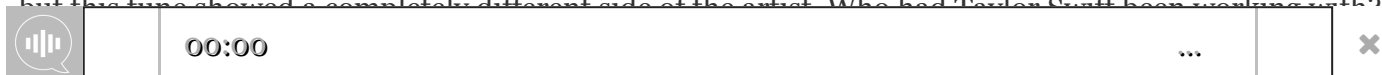
As she was having lunch a couple of years back, Adele heard **Taylor** Swift's *I Knew You Were Trouble*, a song from 2012, and

### FACTS MAX MARTIN

Real name: Martin Sandberg.  
Age: 44. Turns 45 in the end of February.  
Family: Wife och daughter.  
Background: Born in Stenhamra in Uppland, Sweden. His father was a police officer, his mother a school teacher.  
Occupation: Songwriter och producer.  
Lives: Los Angeles and Stockholm.

stopped in her tracks. She could tell that it was Taylor Swift's voice,

but this time showed a completely different side of the artist. Who had Taylor Swift been working with?



### GREETINGS FROM ADELE

Adele's single Hello of her third album exploded like a bomb in November last year.

November, Adele said that as she was told who Taylor's collaborator was, she had to look him up: "I was unaware that I knew who Max Martin was. I Googled him, and I was like, 'He's literally written every massive soundtrack of my life.'"

Adele set up a meeting with Max Martin and **Johan "Shellback" Schuster** in London. Together, they wrote *Send My Love (To Your New Lover)*, the second track on Adele's new album, an album that's broken every conceivable record and rocked the entire music industry.

Until now, Max Martin has refused every extensive magazine interview proposal. He did agree to do an interview for Time Magazine back in 2001. Since then: No thanks. Every newspaper, magazine and TV-channel in the world has asked him over and over again: No thanks.

On the web, an interview from 2009 for the site Popjustice keeps popping up. It's from this piece that People Magazine recently lifted quotes for an article with the angle *The man behind all the hits*.

But the "interview" in Popjustice is just a transcribed phone conversation that took place when Martin agreed to talk a little about Carolina Liar, a Swedish-American rock band that he was working with at the time.

The only recent example of Max Martin agreeing to an interview was when Swedish public radio host **Fredrik Eliasson** made two documentary series on the Cheiron studio.

Last fall, The New Yorker journalist **John Seabrook** released his book *The Song Machine*, the best chronicle to date on the evolution of pop music over the past 20 years. In this book, Max Martin is the main character, but John Seabrook didn't get an interview either.

» *Because my life is so much easier without the attention. I'm not on social media either. I don't do anything like that. I want to keep it simple.* «

The closest Seabrook ever got to Max Martin was greeting him at an awards gala. In the book, all the information about Max Martin comes from people who have worked with him. And foremost, from Fredrik Eliasson's radio docs, which The New Yorker let transcribe and translate.

### Why do you never give interviews?

"Because my life is so much easier without the attention. I'm not on social media either. I don't do anything like that. I meet people who have so many problems related to that kind of stuff. 'People think this or that about me'. But those people wouldn't have those problems if they, like me, hadn't read it. I want to keep it simple."



## CHAPTER 2

# Life in Los Angeles

**M**ax Martin has for several years worked in Los Angeles and Stockholm, alternately. The two cities that, thanks to him, are considered the current capitals of international pop music. New York and London are still New York and London but they're no longer the places where the greatest hits are being written.

For many years, Max Martin would rent studio space whenever he worked in Los Angeles, primarily Conway Studios, a studio with an "everybody's worked there"-CV. Back then, he would stay for months in hotels. If you'd like to find out which of the city's hotels have the best room service, you'd do well to consult Max Martin.

A few years ago, the family decided to settle in Los Angeles on a more permanent basis. "It was just too much, with all the travelling back and forth." Now, their daughter goes to school in Los Angeles. But over her summer breaks, the family moves back to Stockholm. They've bought two houses in Los Angeles, one of which has been remodeled into a studio. Or rather, six small studios in one large house.

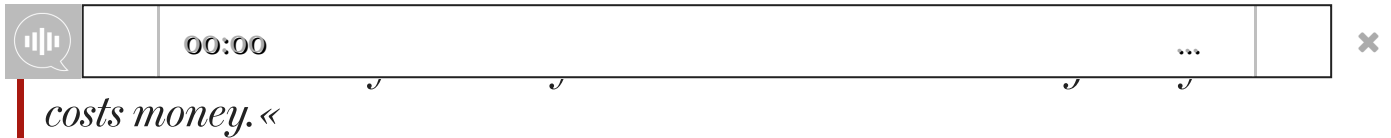
On the exterior, it's just another residential building on a quiet street. The list of previous owners includes **Frank Sinatra**. Frank's spirit is still present in the shape of a framed picture on a shelf. The back portion of the house was once a separate apartment where **Marilyn Monroe** lived from time to time.

Martin and his wife bought the house from the children of a woman who used to be married to a different Hollywood actor whose name Martin can't immediately recall. Later in the day, he hands over his phone where he's Googled the name: "It's this guy".

**James Coburn**, hardboiled Hollywood actor, known from movies like *The magnificent seven*.

Set- and costume designer **Tony Duquette**, who for half a century worked on big Hollywood movies, has also lived in the house. Duquette had a way of decorating that Martin and other owners have chosen

to respect and preserve.



Walking around in the house, the feeling is still that of visiting someone's home. And that's the whole idea.

"I don't want it too fancy, I want everyone to just relax", says Martin.

"Artists sometimes feel uncomfortable in studios where every hour feels like it costs money. That goes for some of the young producers too (who only work on their computers), some of them have never been in a real recording studio. "

The building also houses a small garden, outdoor spaces and a roof terrace. A large open room with a huge dining table is the natural gathering point of the house. People sit down for lunch here, get a snack or a coffee in the kitchen and stand around talking before disappearing into one of the six different recording studios scattered around the house.

It's like a regular but unusually homey office. Only difference is that the people hanging out in the kitchen are often the world's most celebrated artists.

All the people who hang out and work in the house have one thing in common: their love of music.

**Adam Levine** of Maroon 5:

*"There's nothing but music in the room when you work with Max. No politics, no money, Max just loves making music."*

A residential building with six different studios is also a great fit for the way today's pop music is being made. Today, almost every great hit song is the result of a collaborative effort.

Back in the day, pop songs were typically crafted by two people; one person writing the music and another penning the lyrics. Today, focus has shifted from melody & lyrics to tracks & hooks. The sound itself, the production, is of such great importance that it has become an integrated part of the composition. Contemporary pop songs are often created by four to five co-composers.

The artists often participate in songwriting and bring in songs they've started working on.

**Katy Perry:**

*"Max always listens to what the artist wants to do. Furthermore, he's got an incredible team around him, a team he's curated, a team of people who knows him really well. They're all young, and they all have great ears."*

In order to understand the scope of Max Martin's accomplishments, it's important to keep a few things in mind.

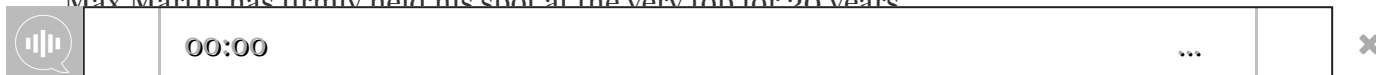
As soon as a brand new Max Martin-tune begins climbing the charts, 10 000 songwriters all over the world immediately try to copy it. There's no pop music patent. A successful formula might work for a few months, perhaps a year, but after that, it's spent and can't be used any longer.

In order to stay at the top of the game, you need to continually evolve and reinvent yourself. Old merits count for nothing.

As a rule, no songwriter or producer in the world has managed to stay in the very top for more than

six or seven years.

Max Martin has firmly held his spot at the very top for 20 years



Polar Music Prize. Paul McCartney had his first number one hit on Billboard in 1963 with The Beatles' "I Want To Hold Your Hand" and his most recent in 1983 with the **Michael Jackson**-duet *Say Say Say*. That's a span of 20 years. That it's been 33 years since Paul McCartney last had a number one on Billboard gives an indication of how difficult it is.

It's also harder to reach the top spot on Billboard today than when **ABBA** (one Billboard #1) was active in the 1970s and **Roxette** (four #1 Billboard hits) in the 1980s. Today, the number ones tend to stay in the top spot for weeks on average. As a consequence, there are fewer number one hits per year.



Max Martin has seen 58 of his songs place among Billboard's Top 10. 21 of them have made it to the #1 spot. Only **Paul McCartney** and **John Lennon** have had more. As a producer, Max Martin has had 19 number one Billboard hits. Only **Sir George Martin** can boast of more.

### SONGWRITER & PRODUCER

Max Martin was awarded Producer of the year at the American Grammy awards in February 2015.

Despite all this, it took a long time before Max Martin received any kind of recognition in Sweden. Many parallels can be made to ABBA. During the band's active years, ABBA was dismissed for simply fabricating pop music hits. Media focused on how much money they were making, instead of on the music and the meticulous work behind it.

The same goes for Max Martin, and it's something that hasn't increased his desire to give interviews.



FRONT FIGURE. Denniz Pop founded Cheiron together with Tom Talomaa.

We've met before. The first time I talked to Max Martin must have been 17 or 18 years ago. He called me up after I'd written an article about Cheiron and the legacy left by **Denniz Pop**. Martin emphasized that he didn't want to be quoted but that he simply wanted to thank me for a serious music article and for the way I'd written about Denniz Pop who had then just passed away.

Another time, we were having coffee one summer day in Stockholm. For an hour and a half, Martin happily explained why he didn't want to be interviewed. Then, he checked his watch and said: "Oops, sorry, gotta go, Katy's on the way".

The closest I've ever gotten to interview him was when I was writing about Swedish soccer superstar



» *OK, let's go, now that I've finally agreed to do this, let's do it properly.*«

That Martin finally agrees to do an interview now – after me having asking him for 20 years – is because of the Polar Music Prize. It is clear that he is very proud and moved by receiving the award.

We sit down in Frank Sinatra's old house, in the room that's still called the library.

"OK, let's go, now that I've finally agreed to do this, let's do it properly", says Martin.

**How does it feel to receive an award that has previously been presented to musicians like Quincy Jones and Joni Mitchell?**

"There something very unreal about it. I've never imagined myself in this kind of context before."

## CHAPTER 3

# The Cheiron legacy

In high school, Martin majored in music at the Södra Latin School in Stockholm, but dropped out to pursue a career as a singer in the metal band It's Alive. The band competed in the Swedish talent show Rock-SM, and went on tour in Switzerland and Germany.

In 1993, Denniz Pop signed It's Alive to short-lived Cheiron Records and produced the band's album *Earthquake visions*. The album never topped the charts but Denniz Pop recognized Martin Sandberg's potential as a songwriter and kept him at the Cheiron studio as some kind of intern.

Max Martin:

"I spent two years, day and night, simply hanging out in the studio, trying to learn what was really going on in there. I didn't even know what a producer did."

Max and Denniz each had musical abilities that complemented each other. Martin could read music and write score. Furthermore, Martin's talents as a singer turned out to be essential to the evolution of



the Cheiron sound. When Denniz passed away from cancer in 1998, Martin carried on, on his own.



before him. **Rami Yacoub** and Max Martin began producing together. Their first joint song was **Britney Spears ...Baby One More Time** LYSSNA. Rami and Martin went on working together for close to ten years.



SHELLBACK. Johan "Shellback" Schuster has created several hits under the wings of Max Martin. He participated on Pinks Raise Your Glass (together with Max Martin) and Maroon 5:s Payphone, the fifth most selling single worldwide 2012.

Max Martin then brought in Johan "Shellback" Schuster as an apprentice into his studio in Stockholm. Shellback came from the hardcore and death metal scene in Karlshamn. After starting out, as Shellback himself puts it, "spending a year making coffee in the studio", he has moved on to co-compose nine #1 Billboard-hits.

In turn, Shellback and Max Martin brought the **Wolf Cousins** into their collaborations. The name Wolf Cousins is a translation of Vargkusinerna, characters made famous in Bamse, a Swedish comic mag for little kids. The name Shellback is a translation of the turtle Skalman, another iconic Bamse figure. The tradition of picking interesting names stays intact.

The Wolf Cousins can best be described as a farm team featuring nine young Swedish songwriters and producers, among them **Tove Lo**. Today, all nine of them are internationally known.

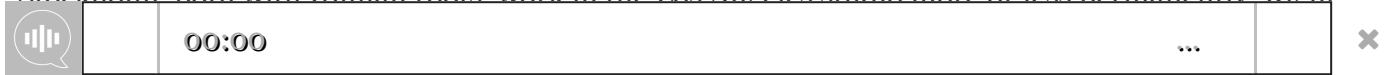


WOLF COUSINS. Ali Payami, Alexander Kronlund and Tove Lo.

The Wolf Cousins fly back and forth between the studio on Roslagsgatan in Stockholm and Martin's studio in Los Angeles. Two of the wolves, **Ali Payami** from Malmö and **Ilse Salmenzadeh** from

STUDIO IN LOS ANGELES. TWO OF THE WOLVES, **Ali Payami** FROM MINNIE AND **Ilya Samanizadeh** FROM

Stockholm both with Iranian roots work in the Los Angeles studio more or less permanently. Right



Ali had his first Billboard number one this past fall with **The Weeknds** *I can't feel my face* LYSSNA , Ilya was close with **Ariana Grande's** *Problem* LYSSNA , which made it to second place. Both songs had Max Martin as co-composer.

**Peter Svensson** from The Cardigans and **Alexander Kronlund** also belong to the group of songwriters working close to Martin. Likewise, **Laleh** has recently joined the Swedish songwriting crew.

» *To suddenly enter a world where the studio and the songs were at the heart of the matter, it was dizzying and completely amazing.* «

### You started out as an intern at Cheiron. Can you tell a little about that time?

"Back then, I was the singer in a rock band. That was a big part of my identity. Since I was very, very young, that's what I had set out to become. So for me to suddenly enter a world where instead, the studio and the songs were at the heart of the matter, it was dizzying – and completely amazing. To join a group of likeminded people who worked 24/7. It was a bit like when I was accepted into Södra Latin, coming from Stenhamra. Just to see Denniz Pop come into the office was huge. To sense that perhaps one day, I too would be able to do something that might be released on an album."

### What did you learn in your rookie days, hanging out with the Cheiron producers?

"Dagge (Denniz Pop) dared to think big. He dared to think bigger than Sweden, he had a very unrestricted and free way of looking at things. I hadn't encountered that before. I might have read about such people, but I had never met anyone like that myself. The first day I sneaked into the studio, they were busy mixing *The Sign* LYSSNA with **Ace of Base**. A song that would later become a number one hit in the US. The energy around that. To be so close to the fire."

» *You no longer had to worry about the way you looked, if you were cool or not. I got lost in the studio.* «

### Once you heard how they were working with pop music, what they listened for in a song, what did you learn?

"More than anything, I felt like I had come home. Sure, I played in a metal band, but I had always loved pop music. *The songs. Beatles. Elton John. Creedence Clearwater Revival.* All the stuff I'd been listening to in my parents' record collection. I've met many people who belong to my generation, whose parents have had roughly the same albums. Perhaps 25 LP's, the ones all baby boomers seem to have had. That Beatles collection when they're standing on the balcony. *Captain Fantastic And The Brown Dirt Cowboy* with Elton John. A *Best of* with Creedence. Songs were at the heart of things at Cheiron. You no longer had to worry about the way you looked, if you were cool or not. I got lost in the studio. Fiddling with the sounds, messing around with samplers. 'Give me this, let me be a part of this'."

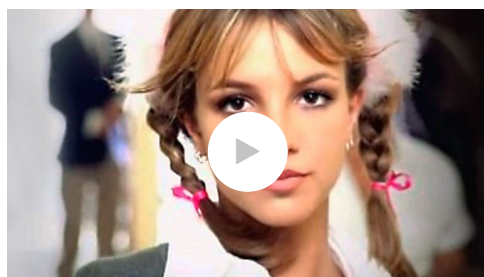


## CHAPTER 4

## The perfect pop song

**What characterizes a great pop song?**

“Well, I can only say what I think. I think that a great pop song should be felt when you hear it. You can hear songs that are technically great, songs that tick all the boxes. But for a song to be felt, you need something else. It’s incredibly important to me that you remember a song right after the first or second time you hear it. That something sticks to you, something that makes you feel: “I need to hear that song again”. That’s fundamental. Something you want again. And again.”



**Your songs are deceptively simple. When you’ve listened to a song four-five times: there needs to be stuff left to discover that makes the song last over time.**

**HOOKED ON A HOOK.**

Max Martins most famous hooks.

“Exactly. You must be able to have more than one favorite part in the same composition. First out, you might like the chorus. Then, once you’ve grown a little tired of that, you should long for the bridge... Dagge always said: “After just one second, you should be able to recognize the song.” He brought that way of thinking with him from his days as a DJ. In order to keep people on the dance

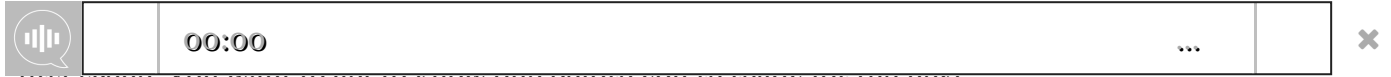
floor as you switch songs, you should never leave people guessing. You should be able to hear right away what’s coming.”

» *There shouldn’t be too much information in the overall sound. I work a lot on getting it all as clear and distinct as possible.* «

**And how do you achieve that? Through the sound?**

“It differs from case to case. There shouldn’t be too much information in the overall sound. I work a

lot on getting it all as clear and distinct as possible. There should never be too many new elements



first scene. You want to get to know one before you're ready for the next.

**This might be a really hard question, but how, exactly, do you build a song?**

”All these questions are really hard!”

**Do you work chronologically – do you begin with the intro?**

””Again, it depends. Lately, I’ve written a lot of music where there’s already a set background.

There’s already a completed track. In those cases, it’s more about working with the dramaturgy of the melody. It should never get repetitive. I like it when a song is like a journey, building up along the way. That they start out smaller than they end. Along the trip, you add elements that make the listener less likely to tire. Then, at the end, euphoria.”

Max Martin thinks for a bit before adding:

”That’s really true for all songs. If you listen to the first, second and third chorus of a song, they don’t sound the same. It’s the same melody and all that but what really happens is that the energy changes. It’s all about getting the listener to keep his or her concentration. When I play a song to someone and ask ”So how do you like this?”, I don’t care all that much about what they say. What I really pay attention to is how they act, their body language.

People who lose their concentration give themselves away very quickly. If they start fiddling with their phones as the second verse kicks in, there may be something about the tune that wasn’t good enough. Something also happens when I listen as if with other people’s ears. I get nervous and think to myself, ’Shit, this part is a bit too slow’.”

**Each and every artist I’ve talked to about the way you work, from Britney and Brian & AJ from Backstreet Boys to Katy Perry to Pink, all mention how intensely you work on their singing. The vocal element seems to be of incredible importance to you.**

”””The vocals are always my main concern.

handle that part, while they themselves climb out on the couch. But I like to be there myself, handling everything on the computer myself. I want to know exactly what went on and I need to be able to recall it all. Singing involves a great deal of psychology. If the artist isn't having a great day or finds it all boring. My role becomes that of a coach. Getting the very best out of the artist. Helping them perform at their very best when it's game time. One way to get them there is to bring them out of their comfort zones. To coach them a little, get them to try new stuff.”

**One can hear it in your productions, but I don't think that many people realize just how much hard work actually goes into the vocals.**

”I've heard the difference when others have recorded the vocals, though I won't name names. It's all about how the artist sings the song. That's the most important thing of all. Some artists have a clear vision of what they want to do, but many have quite nervous, sensitive personalities. Many have microphone phobia. It may sound really strange to have microphone phobia when you're an artist, but that's how it is. I have to imagine myself in their situation. Hold their hands a little when it's time to record the vocals.”

*»From day one, the one thing that I've had the most use of in this profession is my background as a singer. To be able to sing and demonstrate your vision when you record a demo has been crucial.«*

**Is it just you and the artist in the room when you record the vocal tracks?**

”No, there are always a few more people in the room, handling the technical side of things. It's also up to the artist. If someone wants 10 people in the room, that's fine. But if it's up to me, there won't be many people in the room. All I want to focus on is how this one person sounds.”

**When you want to get the artist to sing in a certain way, do you sing it yourself the way you think it should sound?**

”I'd say that's the one thing I've had more use of than anything else. From day one, the one thing that I've had the most use of in this profession is my background as a singer. I minored in singing at Södra Latin, I sang in a band. I was pretty good, back in the day. To be able to sing and demonstrate your vision when you record a demo has been crucial. It's a lot harder to show someone who is really good at singing if you can't sing yourself. It might be about a technical detail, to be able to really get to the core of whatever problem there is. For the artist, it can also be a trust issue. Something we can bond over. It's worse when the artist sings even worse than you. (laughs). But that doesn't happen too often these days.”





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**How do you construct a vocal melody? It seems very complex. First there's a melody, then there's another one on top of it. How do you do it?**

"I have lots of theories when it comes to this. If you've got a verse with a lot of rhythm, you want to pair it with something that doesn't. Longer notes. Something that might not start at the same beat. As I say this, I'm afraid it might sound like I've got a whole concept figured out...But it's not like that. The most crucial thing is always how it feels. But the theories are great to have on hand when you get stuck. 'We can't think of anything, is there anything we could do?' In those cases, you can bring it in as a tool. If you listen to *Shake It Off* with Taylor Swift (he hums the verse melody). After that segment, you need a few longer notes in order to take it all in, otherwise it's simply too much information. If there would have been as many rhythm elements in the part right before the chorus ... Does what I'm saying make any sense to you at all?"

**Yes, this is so interesting. This is exactly what I'm trying to get at.**

"Sweet and salt might be a description that's easier to grasp. You need a balance, at all times. If the verse is a bit messy, you need it to be less messy right after. It needs to vary. *Shake It Off* is a good example, where the math behind the drama is pretty clear. But the melodies themselves, they may appear wherever. It's never like 'Now I'm going to sit down and write this or that kind of song'. The melodies may show up in the car, in the shower. From then on it's all about how you manage the melody, how you make sure that you'll be able to hear it over and over again without tiring of it."

**You said you had more theories on this?**

"How much time do we have?"

**Plenty!**

"If the chords change a lot over the course of a song, it's better to stay within the same melodic



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melody as a verse. For instance, take *I Wanna Be Your Lover* with **Prince**. The verse and chorus of that song are exactly the same. But as a listener, you don't really notice since the energy of the chorus is completely different compared to the verse (he sings like Prince to show his point). Once the chorus comes, you feel like you've heard it before. And you have! You've heard it in the verse. It automatically creates a sense of familiarity. Prince does this a lot. *Let's Go Crazy*, same thing. I've used this trick a few times myself. In *Do You Know (What It Takes)* LYSSNA with **Robyn** for instance."

**How many times did you listen to *I Wanna Be Your Lover* before you reached this kind of conclusion? Do you study songs in close detail?**

"There was a phase when I and people around me listened to Prince a lot. A lot. We took Prince-fandom to the extreme. The insights we gained proved helpful. Absolutely not like the fundamental ways of making music. Sometimes you hear rumors like 'They've figured it out!' But it's not like that. It's about understanding and learning, putting a toolbox together.

*»In the beginning, it seemed important to prove stuff. 'I'll show them. Look at me'. But that whole thing is over and done with since long ago.«*

**Had there been a set formula, other people would have been able to mimic you, but you have steadily evolved musically. How have you managed to reinvent yourself so many times?**

"I feel it's really important to stress this: The majority of the songs that have brought me here are the results of lots of people helping out. I would like to share the Polar prize with so many people. None mentioned, none forgotten. It's my collaborations with others that have made me able to stay on beyond the average lifespan of a songwriter. I've been blessed to work with so many young people. How do they do it? They make me work hard to keep up. I feel so humbled by this fact. I want to saw the Polar prize into 10 pieces and share it with others."

**At the same time, this is a way of working that you have chosen. Did you bring it with you from Denniz Pop? Song writing as teamwork?**

"Absolutely. But it's also about realizing – after having done this for such a long time – how important it is to have fun, too. In the beginning, it seemed important to prove stuff. 'I'll show them. Look at me'. But that whole thing is over and done with since long ago. What drives me today is to make great things and to have fun. I've realized that it's much more enjoyable to do stuff together. Sitting around on your own isn't all that fun. It's better to surround yourself with great people. Playing soccer is more fun when you're playing on a team."

*»It feels a bit strange to say it myself but I think I've been fairly good at keeping my ego in check. The ego gets in the way for many people.«*

**It sounds so natural when you say it, but American and British songwriters rarely work like this. Many fear letting younger rivals join the process. You risk that the younger crew will surpass you.**

"And they do. On a daily basis. It feels a bit strange to say it myself but I think I've been fairly good



And they do. On a daily basis. It feels a bit strange to say it myself but I think I've been fairly good at keeping my ego in check. The ego gets in the way for many people. In many ways I don't think it's



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heart. But, sure, I have an ego like everybody else. I've had to work on it at times over the years."

### **How do you keep your ego in check?**

"In my case, my wife has been the greatest help. In making sure I stay grounded. My wife and some of my friends. But it's hard. I can certainly understand artists who suffer because of their egos. This is also why I've chosen to stay away from what we're doing now (the interview context). If nobody recognizes you, if nobody cares, it's easier to avoid getting carried away. That's way harder if you're a famous artist. I've seen many examples of when things have gone really wrong.

### **Very early on, you decided to not give interviews.**

"That too, goes back to Prince. I thought it was so cool that all you knew about Prince was about his artistry and music. Early on, Dagge (Denniz Pop) and I did an interview for some weekend supplement. We left the studio and did the interview in a cafe somewhere. Right away, I realized how wrong it all felt. 'What am I doing, sitting here blabbing away? I should be in the studio. That's my place.' Then, for two weeks, I was anxious about what it would say in the paper. One upside of saying no is that nothing happens. If you say yes, stuff can happen, if you say no, you don't need to worry."

### **Does this also relate to your profession? That your role as a songwriter and producer is to promote the artist? That the artist is the one who should be in the spotlight?**

"Yes, exactly. I don't think most people who listen to music are that interested in all the work that goes into making it. It's the artist you like."

»Pop music follows the evolution of society in general. Everything moves faster. Intros have gotten shorter.«

### **How has the very structure of a pop song changed during the 20 years you've been working?**

"It keeps changing all the time. We've just made it out from the marshlands of EDM. Nothing wrong about EDM, great songs came out of it, but there was a period when everything had to have a pace of 128 bpm and be DJ-related. These days, there's no dominating trend among the Top 40-songs, and I really enjoy that. A hit can be someone just singing to piano music, anything. But back to your question: I recently re-watched an old movie that I used to like when it came out. Now that I watched it over, I felt the movie's tempo. It all felt a bit slow. They showed the whole trip to the airport. Today it's more 'Boom!' and you're at the airport. The same thing has happened to pop music. There's less downtime. Pop music follows the evolution of society in general. Everything moves faster. Intros have gotten shorter."

»I'm simply not musically equipped for jazz, but I love listening to it. I love Chet Baker.«

### **How do stay up to date with today's new music?**

"I primarily listen to what we're working on. I listen way too little to new music. I can get really jealous of a guy like Ali (Payami), who listens to new music all the time. On the other hand, I'm a bit damaged by my profession in the way that I keep up with what's out there. I know what's new among



the new stuff. I want to know what's going on, what people are up to. I've also started listening to jazz. A



**Is it because you don't have any plans of your own for making that kind of music?**

"Yes. I'm simply not musically equipped for jazz, but I love listening to it. I love Chet Baker. It's driving my daughter crazy. "Oh no, not Chet Baker again. She's heard me play his music so much that by now she knows all his songs."

## CHAPTER 5

### A day in the studio

**M**artin sits down in his wheeled office chair in his workplace. In front of him, on a desk, sits today's equivalent of a mixing table: a computer screen visualizing the music. Instruments are hanging all over the walls around him. Different kinds of keyboards, different kinds of guitars, an ukulele. No gold records or statuettes. The only visible adornment is two books that Martin has placed on his desk right next to the computer, with the book covers in clear view.

One of the books is a pedagogical Beatles-book with a cartoon cover intended to introduce and explain Beatles to children.

"This one is funny cause some of the young artists who come here barely know who the Beatles are."

The other book is Max Blöja – Max Diaper. It's a Swedish children's book by author Barbro Lindgren. Max Diaper is a sight that meets every world-leading artist that comes in to work with Martin.

Martin didn't come up with the name Max Martin himself. Instead, it was coined by his mentor, Dag Volle, more known by his producer name Denniz Pop. In 1994, he wrote on a record, without first asking Martin: "Produced by Denniz Pop and Max Martin". The first tune to bear the epoch making signature was *This Is The Way* LYSSNA with the swedish artist **E-Type**.

As I point questioningly towards the Max Diaper-book, Martin replies: "I was sitting around with my

friend **Alexander Kronlund** discussing which names could possibly be worse than Max Martin. We



How do you divide your time when you're working.

**Yesterday you told me that these days, you try to work just eight hours and that you no longer work on the weekends. So how do you structure your workdays?**

"It depends on what I'm working on. If you're in the midst of a process when you're making stuff up, when you write songs, then every day can be completely different from the other. There may be days when nothing happens mixed with incredibly intense days. There was a long phase when I worked so, so much. Several years when the names of the weekdays lost their meaning. I went to work every day, no matter what the calendar said. Now that I have a family, I'm a bit more careful with the time. So if it's songwriting, there may be some coffee, some Fifa. You go beating around the bush. But other than that, it's disciplined work."

**You sit yourself down by the screen and get to work?**

"Exactly."



**When a new artist comes by the studio and you're about to make a new album together. How do you start off?**

"It depends if the artist takes part in the writing or not. How actively the artist is involved in the creative work. Some artists just sing. But in recent years, we've worked a lot with artists who are very involved. Then, it's more about producing an artist's songwriting. They have an idea, I listen. 'Ok, that's great, cut that, repeat that, now we've got something'. We rarely sit by the campfire together, creating. Sometimes, the part I play in the songwriting is quite small. But hopefully, I'll still add a few crucial details when it comes to the overall dramaturgy. I worked with **The Weeknd**, he's

an artist with a very clear vision. That makes my job easier. But at times, you have to work like a fan. Write a song that you want that artist to sing."

**Isn't that how you worked in the beginning NSYNC, Backstreet Boys and Britney when they were so young?**

"Yes, I come from that background. That you write a song that someone else came in to sing. But in recent years, I've come to enjoy collaborations more. At the same time, being around artists takes its toll... I'm more tired after a full workday with an artist than after a day when I've just been working on my own."

**Looking at your career, it may seem like you've enjoyed steady success for 20 years, but you did have a period after Cheiron when things weren't going all that well.**



"I've learned that things change. The whole boy band thing almost turned into a stock market crash. We folded Cheiron at the right moment. Then, there was a period when we thought that **Pharrell (Williams)** and the others came and ruined it all for us with their super cool beats. My first thought was: people are idiots for not understanding how great our stuff really is. Then, in the end, I

**TEMPORARY SETBACK**

realized: the world has moved on, we're the ones who're stuck in



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song 'I'm a Slave 4 U' from Britney's third album, written and produced by The Neptunes with Pharrell Williams, sounded completely different.

got anywhere. Then things took a new turn with *Since U Been Gone*

LYSSNA **(Kelly Clarkson)**. But at the same time, during the

Cheiron era, we never really understood what we had achieved

down in our basement in Stockholm. Since we never realized how

big we were back then, I took that cold period with a shrug of the shoulders."



TEENAGE DREAMS. In a bunker in Stockholm young songwriters and producers such as Andreas Carlsson and Jörgen Elofsson created boyband songs in the years between 1992-2000. The street outside if the studio was always occupied by young fans.

### **You started out playing the French horn. What did you learn from that?**

"Only reason I started playing the French horn was because I was watching when the horn section of the municipal music school came to visit my school. It must have been one of those days when they came around for a demonstration. Once I saw the French horn, I thought it was the coolest instrument so I decided to take that up. Then, once I realized there weren't all that much music to be played on the French horn, I switched to trumpet. Two great things came out of that; playing the horns resulted in giving me a great technique once I took up singing for real. The technique is basically the same, it's the same breathing. The other great thing was that the space where the municipal music school taught classes was right next to rehearsing rooms used by local rock bands. Just walking by, I could hear plenty of noise seeping out. It sparked an interest in rock music. And then I started writing my own songs when I was 14-15."

**It's sweet that you thought that the French horn was the coolest of all the instruments. Few other kids would come to the same conclusion.**

"I've never been cool! My tastes have always been pretty cheesy. I like **Def Leppard**. At the same time, my tastes might be pretty universal, I don't know."

**As Cheiron producers, you came from the metal scene. You took the chorus styles from metal and put them in a pop context.**

"Yes, all those grand choruses. And while we're on the matter of taste, I remember my older brother coming home with a Swedish magazine called Poster. Remember that one? It had posters you could unfold. They were two-sided so you could take your pick. On one side, **Kiss** – the iconic image with the

band up on Empire State Building. On the other side of the poster, a weird band out in the woods, who



Now, my daughter has started listening to them. Led Zeppelin has received the Polar prize, right?”

**Yes.**

””But Kiss has never been awarded?”

**No.**

”The thing that was so great about Kiss was that they thought worldwide. Arenas, the *Alive!* LYSSNA -album, the attitude. The fact that they had such a grand scope was so great. By the way, I met **Gene Simmons** last spring. It was the first time we met. An ASCAP-happening. Kiss were rewarded some kind of prize for good and loyal service. (Martin doesn’t mention that at this prestigious gala, he was titled Songwriter of The Year – for the eight time.) So I got to say hi to Gene Simmons! I might not agree with his world views, but it was a big thing for me to be able to thank him.”



OOPS, I DID IT AGAIN... Max Martin has been repeatedly awarded. He has received the title Songwriter of the year in America eight times.

### How did Gene Simmons react?

”Funny thing was that he said ‘Hold on, can you repeat that so that my son can hear it too?’ And then Gene Simmons went to get his son so that he would get to hear me say those things about his dad. That moment was pretty hard to imagine when I was six years old, staring at the Kiss-posters in my room.”

**Cheiron was a pretty homogenous gathering of men with Swedish surnames but you’ve welcomed producers with foreign backgrounds and have actively looked to involve more women.**



MULTI TALENT. The swedish artist Laleh is one of Max Martins latest co-workers. ”Laleh is a fantastic

example of someone who is just as good as a



"I don't care where people are from, what their background is. If you're killing it, you're in. It's crucial that we get more women in on the technical side. Today, there are many great female songwriters but there are very few women producers. We need to change that. Laleh (who Martin has begun working with) is a fantastic example of someone who is just as good as a producer. Laleh is a genius. The best way to change things around is to bring in more role models like her. It sucks that there are so many men in my profession."

**Roar** LYSSNA , which you wrote with Katy Perry, didn't just become a #1 single. In the US, the song also turned into an anthem for kids suffering from cancer. Both children and doctors posted videos of themselves singing "Roar". *Roar*.



#### **SUPPORTING CANCER VICTIMS.**

The staff at a childrens hospital singing Roar.

"When pop culture can influence things in any way, when a song becomes something bigger than just a song, that's the greatest thing to me. I saw the video where the whole staff of a children's hospital sang 'Roar', and it was a reminder for me. I have a tendency to belittle what I do. I think it's a consequence of trying to keep the ego in check. I go, 'What the f\*\*\* are we doing all day when others are working for equality, Syria, battling cancer.' But then something like this happens; a song finds its way outside the studio and comes to really mean something to people. It's not every time that I'm proud of a tune, but I am when it comes to a song like *Roar*."

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